

Boatbuilding On The Aspetuck: An Artist's Thoughts About Art, Aging, and Anxiety

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Editor's note: Mr LaBorie's artwork "Boatbuilding on the Aspetuck" may be seen on page 89.

For the readers of this learned journal, please note: I'm not a practicing psychologist; I don't have a degree in psychiatry; and I'm not an expert in gerontology; but having been up the creek without a paddle a few times, I can draw some conclusions about art, aging, anxiety, and how the Aspetuck figures into this *mélange*.

Let's start at the start, as my Aunt Minnie used to say.

The Aspetuck River wends its way south through Fairfield County in Connecticut. Although it isn't a mighty river in its own right—the reputations of the Mississippi and the Amazon are hardly at risk—it is a stream with some significance for local residents and for me in particular.

I doubt if there was ever any serious ship or even boatbuilding efforts on the Aspetuck itself but, when it joins the Saugatuck River in Westport, the combined waters marked the scene of very active river commerce during the 19th century.

So much for the facts.

Occasionally the Aspetuck overflows its banks, like some small child acting out. In general, however, it simply goes about its mission, minding its own business and steadily working its way to the sea. It always operates in the present moment, and best of all, it's inventive: it accepts obstacles on its way downstream, works around them when it can, has the innate wisdom to understand the difference, and just keeps on keeping on. In short, it's a good example of growing older with grace and dignity—an art form we can all practice and learn from.

Art does not reproduce what we see; rather, it makes us see.

—Paul Klee¹

I love Paul Klee's thought, because it seems to me that learning to really see the world around us and for me, the Aspetuck in particular, and then to translate our vision into an expressive art form, is a lifelong adventure that can have considerable therapeutic value.

I began attempting to see inside the temporal world when I was about six years old. I was bed-ridden with rheumatic fever for more than six months. World War II had just ended, and the long nights of blackout curtains, hooded car headlights, ration books, air raid drills, and dreams about sinister Nazis (always in uniform) sneaking through our backyard with dark intentions were over.

Nothing Much To Do

With nothing much to do and too weak to hold a book, I listened to the radio for hours on end. I tuned in to Franklin Delano Roosevelt's funeral, heard the clip-clopping of the horses' hooves as they pulled the president's flag-draped casket down Pennsylvania Avenue, the muffled drums rolling in the background, and the announcer's hushed tones as he breathed into the microphone—the solemnity of the occasion made a deep and lasting impression on me. An era was over, but it is still quite alive in my memory and imagination.

While I lay in bed, I started to visualize wartime activity in the cracks and crevices of the wooden headboard. I imagined lines of soldiers following mountain trails along the cracks, important crossroads complete with military vehicles appeared

where the cracks converged. There were rivers to be forded, machine gun nests to be dealt with, small villages came into being in knotholes. In short, an entire world opened up to me, right in my bedroom.

It was all in my head, but that dream world stirred my imagination and has stuck with me to this day. However, because of my illness, I failed first grade and had to sit quietly at home all summer long, while my few friends went off on vacation.

By the time I reached high school I had won an award for a watercolor I'd created, but I was still a tall, skinny kid who was supposed to wear his glasses all the time. In my mind, I was inferior to my peers. I didn't fit in.

In a Drawing Class

Now fast forward to college. I'm in a drawing class; well, barely in a drawing class, since I had a "D" average. How was that possible for someone who liked making art? Perhaps because I didn't draw what the professor asked me to draw? Good possibility.

My instructor was thoroughly frustrated and annoyed by my failure to pay attention, follow instructions, and in general, be part of his class. In hindsight, those seem like reasonable enough requests. Finally, faced with the distinct possibility of flunking the course, I tried following his directives. *Eureka!* It worked! I could actually put on paper what my eye saw rather than just what my imagination created! It was an exciting discovery, and I got reasonably good at it. Of course, I failed to do anything further with my newfound ability. What is it about youth?

After college graduation, I eventually got a position as a copywriter in an ad-

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vertising agency in Philadelphia (I was actually an English major). A few years later, I was offered another copywriting job at an agency in San Francisco and moved to the West Coast. Then, at the suggestion of a photographer friend of mine, I dropped out of the ad biz and enrolled in The San Francisco Art Institute.

It was the mid-1960s, and undergraduate work at the Institute was an amazing experience. Our instructors were some of the best-known artists on the West Coast, at the time and I came away from that experience with some sound advice that my mentors had drilled into my thick head: don't give up, look harder, think more, keep your mouth shut, and don't, for any reason, settle for "It's good enough."

Now that I'm 73

I try to keep their advice in mind. I find that it's easy enough to settle for work that has visual appeal, at least for some people, but doesn't press the envelope hard enough. I'm a big fan of a quote that I heard from Philip Glass. On his 75th birthday he said, "... our brains are constantly evolving. Our brains are very plastic; they continue to grow."²

I think we should all feel that way; the older we get, with any luck, the more we can learn, execute, and pass on to others.

But it's a tough lesson to put into action, even though so many elders have so much to contribute to our understanding of what life and art are all about.

Think about the wonderful work that aging artists have produced over the years—some famous, some not so famous: Rembrandt, with his marvelous self-portrait in old age; Monet, painting well into his 80s, even though he suffered from cataracts; Matisse, carefully arranging bold, colored shapes on his deathbed; Georgia O'Keefe and the intimate flower series she created in her later years; and the efforts by one of my favorite contemporary painters, the late Estaban Vicente.

Age Didn't Restrict Their Insights

In each case, age didn't restrict their insights. Their visions became that much more acute as well as their ability to continually expand their thinking and beliefs as they grew older. Today, I've

challenged myself to finally take the bull by the horns and expose my inner feelings to the public at large. I'm painting for myself, and if anyone else is interested, that's great; if not, not.

Will I be another Matisse or Vicente? Highly doubtful. Am I finding satisfaction in what I'm creating? Certainly. Does creating works of art ensure some measure of confidence in a time of crisis? In my case, it certainly appears to be that way.

The present moment is where life can be found, and if you don't arrive there, you miss your appointment with life.

—Thich Nhat Hanh³

By living in the present (just the way any river does)—not worrying about the past, but learning from it—not by anticipating what the next wave of events will bring, or when it will happen, we create an opportunity to practice the art of living life to its fullest.

And, after all, when you think about it, why not? The future hasn't arrived yet, and it will be what you *make* of it, and the past is the past—it was what you made of it.

By being fully aware of just what you're doing, how you feel, and what you see, you can turn what might just be ordinary, even mundane events into what Lodro Rinzler terms "... seeing the world as sacred, and appreciating the magic of ordinary moments."⁴

For instance, it's a no brainer that anxiety will affect most of us at some point or another. You know, the worries many of us encounter about paying the bills, losing our income, screwing up on the job or with the kids—and all the turmoil and self-doubt these events can create.

Creating Stuff

It turns out that a good antidote for dealing with anxiety is creating "stuff." The more positive mental stimulation a person experiences, the better their mental health becomes—apparently the brain responds favorably to the right stimulation. The trick is to find the proper stimulation—not all that easy sometimes.

In my case, anxiety reared its head when job loss and illness created a fi-

nancial and emotional crisis. How were we going to pay the mortgage, for starters?

If that wasn't enough, our advertising business, which had been quite successful for more than ten years, simply disintegrated. Long-time clients disappeared, no new clients appeared, income dropped to zero—in fact, at one point, we were living on social security and unemployment benefits—period.

Anxious times, indeed, but, with my family's support, I continued to make art, even though there were times when I wasn't sure where the money was going to come from to pay for the supplies.

So, given all that was happening to our family—conventional thinking says we should have felt overwhelmed and discouraged. But, during all those trials, I felt just the opposite.

Certainly, we were and still are facing considerable challenges, but we will survive. Although I'm hopeful that our financial situation will eventually change for the better, perhaps scrambling for money to pay the bills will be our new "normal," and we'll just have to adjust to it.

Artistic Efforts Pay Dividends

Most of all, I feel that my artistic efforts will continue to pay dividends—if not in monetary returns, at least in real satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment.

All of this is just an aspect of conscious aging in action. Embracing the future instead of retreating. Opening your mind to new possibilities rather than settling for the status quo. And, above all, enjoying the questions—regardless of your age, regardless of your domestic or financial situation, and regardless of what others think about what you're doing—as long as it isn't detrimental to those around you, let it loose!

Does it matter if anyone likes whatever art you make, or even buys a piece? Not really, be nice if it happens, but the real benefit comes from just doing it. Is it going to hang in the Museum of Modern Art or on your Aunt Minnie's

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wall? Who cares? Will you be the next Grandma Moses? Who knows? As far as I'm concerned, you just have to keep on keeping on.

*Everything will be all right in the end. So if it is not all right, then it is not yet the end.*⁵

Aspetuck

Which brings us back to the Aspetuck. I don't know that splashing about in a clean river automatically ensures one will live a more productive life but, looking back, the ideas of honest self appraisal, being in the moment, and creativity first came together many years ago when my seven-year-old twin sons from a previous marriage came to visit.

I had constructed two small river craft for them to play with in the Aspetuck. The boats were made of old barn wood, assorted bits of plastic, and one vessel

was crowned with a sleek upper deck made from a metal coat hanger—artistic inventiveness at its best!

Unfortunately, the boats promptly capsized when they were launched and their maiden voyage was marked by numerous attempts to get them to float upright—all to no avail—an honest appraisal of my efforts would conclude that Dad's model boatbuilding ability wasn't worth a plug nickel!

But, the boys didn't seem to mind at all as they happily splashed in the somewhat chilly water and directed their ships to unknown shores. All in all, it was a fabulous way to spend a summer afternoon: two young boys and their part-time dad. Talk about being in the moment!

So, in my experience, when the world is too much for you, as an antidote I recommend pausing for a

few minutes to admire a river. They are natural philosophers, and there is virtually no end to the constructive things they can teach us about honest self-examination of our motives and aspirations, positive thinking, and creativity. All we need to do is take the time to stop, look, and listen. ❖

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Alchemy

There is an alchemy in sorrow. It can be transmuted into wisdom, which, if does not bring joy, can yet bring happiness.

— Pearl S Buck, 1892-1973, American writer and novelist,
1938 Nobel Laureate for Literature